

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

INFORMATION

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Status Report on the Nigerian Civil War

Success
 Tuesday, April 8, 1969
 I have decided that
 our policy supporting the
 Fed is wrong. They
 can't make it - Let's begin
 to get State off this
 kick -

There may be some break in the dull-stalemate that has hung over the Nigerian war since the NSC considered the problem in mid-February. It is still too early to draw any conclusions, but I thought it would be useful to pull together a picture of where various developments -- military, diplomatic, and our own relief policy -- now stand.

State Dept. review completed

The Federal Offensive

The Federals have been trying for more than a year to mount a "final" push to overrun the 70 x 40-mile Biafran enclave. They have been stymied by their own inefficiency and dogged Biafran resistance fueled by the French arms supply. But the political pressures and frustration have been building steadily inside the Federal coalition. General Gowon and his colleagues are clearly afraid (and justifiably so) that if Biafra survives to celebrate its second anniversary of independence on May 31st, it will be a major diplomatic and moral victory for the rebels.

Operating on that timetable, the Federal First Division apparently ^{25X1} launched a major attack last week from the north side of the Biafran perimeter [redacted] They seem to be striking directly for Biafra's capital of Umuahia, though a secondary target would be the airstrip 20 miles to the west of the capital where Biafran arms and food come in by night airlift. There are few hard facts so far on the progress of the offensive. First reports had the Federals moving against very heavy resistance to within 12 miles of the Biafran capital. Federal 105 Howitzers could have been within range of the capital over the weekend. Destruction or capture of Umuahia would be a major Federal victory and a serious blow to Biafran morale.

Today, though, there are Biafran claims that the Federals are being pushed back. Judging from the slim evidence we have, our intelligence people now think the Federal offensive has been stalled.

There are just too many imponderables here to predict the outcome. For example: (1) Federals have taken much of this ground before only to

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be repelled or outflanked by the Biafrans; (2) Biafra is still getting enough arms by air -- about 100 tons a week -- to support a credible defense against the larger Federal force; (3) the other two Federal divisions on the line -- in the west and south -- have not been able to move, yet their breakthrough is probably essential to make possible a sustained advance by the attacking division in the north; (4) finally, even if the Biafran capital should fall, the rebels would have their forces largely intact and could regroup to a new defense line.

On paper, in sheer numbers and materiel, the Federal offensive ought to be successful. As throughout this bitter little war, however, the issues will probably be decided by factors of Biafran morale and ingenuity that no military manual could measure. In sum, this latest Federal offensive might alter the fighting line, but the odds are still against a quick end to the war and suffering.

Prime Minister Wilson's Visit to Nigeria

Predictably, Wilson has returned empty-handed from his flying visit to the Federal side last week. He was given a polite but cool reception by the Nigerians, who understood the trip was mainly designed to soften Parliamentary criticism of the P. M.'s pro-Federal stance. Wilson did push General Gowon hard on Federal bombing of civilian targets in Biafra. He did get a promise of a tighter rein on the pilots, which probably means little with the very uncertain Federal discipline between Lagos and the front. The Prime Minister also went on to Addis Ababa to see Haile Selassie and boosted the OAU as peace maker. So far as our reports indicate, that too was a polite exchange of familiar views with no real impact on events.

Wilson's plight was most obvious in a last minute effort to schedule a meeting with Biafran leader Ojukwu. Ojukwu turned him down flatly. But the refusal was managed with the usual Biafran propaganda skill, allowing back bench critics in Parliament to charge that Wilson himself had mis-handled and squelched the meeting.

The British domestic benefits of Wilson's visit are likely to be short-lived. His policy of support for the Federals will make him fair game for the critics as long as the war lasts -- and even afterward, if he is still in office.

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Other Diplomacy

Meanwhile, there are others anxious to play a diplomatic role -- none of them with reasonable prospects. President Houphouet-Boigny of the Ivory Coast (undoubtedly with de Gaulle's blessing) is trying to bring the two sides together "without pre-conditions." Yet the Fedrals don't trust pro-Biafran Houphouet even far enough to respond to his pleas.

The OAU is trying to get talks started in Monrovia, Liberia, at a meeting of its Consultative Committee for Nigeria on April 18. But that effort is foundering on tragic-comic obstacles so characteristic of this war: (a) Ojukwu won't come unless Gowon stops the bombing and comes himself; (b) Gowon won't stop the bombing for military reasons, and won't come because he is getting married on the 19th with plans for a honeymoon rather than negotiations with the rebels.

This diplomatic minuet means nothing while the Federal offensive is in progress. Both sides remain convinced that victory lies on the battle field rather than at the conference table. Until events persuade them otherwise, there is no chance of authentic negotiations.

The U. S. Special Coordinator

Against this background, Clyde Ferguson, our Special Coordinator for Relief, has just returned from a 3-week swing through the area, including a visit to Biafra. Ferguson got generally sympathetic but evasive responses to his urgings to expand relief. Biafra still rejects both daylight flights and a land corridor on military grounds. They seem to be getting just enough food by the current night time airlift to avert a major disaster. They veto any relief arrangement that might offer a military advantage should the Federals violate the exchange point.

Ferguson is quietly pursuing one outside chance -- a river corridor running up from the coast and entering Biafra on the extreme east side of the perimeter. This would run through an area which has been relatively free of fighting and of no strategic concern to either party. Even if the military obstacle is cleared away, however, there are still major problems of politics and logistics. Ferguson obviously has his work cut out for him, and plans to go back to the area next week to do some more quiet bargaining.

Meanwhile, the Ferguson appointment seems to have satisfied amply its public relations role here at home. The Congressional critics and public lobbies on Biafran relief have been tolerably quiet for the first time in months.

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The Prospects

All this adds up to a probable continuation of the war at least through the spring and summer. If the Federals don't force a military decision now -- and the odds are against that -- the rainy season coming in May and June will forestall another all-out push until late summer.

One general prospect at least seems clear: every passing day increases the war weariness and political unrest on the Federal side, while it strengthens Biafran morale. And though there is no real sign of it now, a lengthening war is also bound to give Federal backers -- the Soviets as well as the harried British -- second thoughts. The least vulnerable party in the Nigerian tangle is the one who has invested less and influenced more than anyother -- General de Gaulle.

RMorris:lw
4/8/69

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